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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: UNION OF RIGHT FORCES: A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS  
  
REF: MOSCOW 2603

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle; reasons 1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Union of Right Forces (SPS) party leader Nikita Belykh painted a very pessimistic picture for the Ambassador September 22 of the chances of uniting democratic opposition parties and of electoral prospects for Kremlin opponents in the next 5-7 years. Belykh said that either the party would fall under quasi-Kremlin control (as part of the "loyal opposition"), or it would remain independent at the forefront of a coalition of democratic parties. In light of the troubles the Kremlin has made for SPS under his leadership, Belykh is resisting the first alternative. Given the September 22 return to (Kremlin-approved) government service of SPS elder Anatoliy Chubais, competition within the party over which path to pursue is likely to intensify within the months ahead. END SUMMARY.

Kremlin Calling All the Political Tunes Right Now  
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¶2. (C) Union of Right Forces party leader Nikita Belykh opened his meeting with the Ambassador September 22 by saying "The current situation does not lead to optimism," and then proceeded to stick to that theme throughout. Belykh noted that Russia was suffering from the consequences of both the global financial crisis (coming at the same time as oil prices dropped) and those resulting from the Georgian conflict. He said that growing state control and militarization of the economy were the worrisome developments. While some political quarters in Russia had harbored hope that Medvedev would carry through on promises from his campaign and early days in office to pursue a reform agenda, the Georgia conflict had ended those illusions. Though Medvedev's recent "measured response" to Secretary Rice's speech on Russia and pledges in a September 19 meeting with Russian NGO officials that he intended to continue with his reform agenda kept alive those prospects, Belykh was doubtful they would amount to much.

¶3. (C) Belykh outlined two possible paths for his party in the coming months:

-- SPS could participate in the "Kremlin's democracy project," transforming itself into a loyal opposition party under the complete control of the Kremlin. Belykh said an intense intra-party debate is underway on this subject (including struggles with SPS elder leader Anatoliy Chubais), but that he strongly opposes accepting Kremlin control; or

-- SPS could remain an independent party. This will not be easy, because SPS simply does not have enough members in the regions to meet the legal requirements to remain a national political entity. To accomplish this, SPS would unite with other democratic parties, notably with former PM Kasyanov's People's National Democratic Union and/or Vladimir Ryzhkov's Republic Party. SPS would remain distinct, but at the

forefront of the coalition. Given SPS's lack of representation in regional parliaments throughout the country, Belykh said that there is pressure to do something to give regional leaders reason to believe that they have a future in a truly democratic opposition.

¶4. (C) Belykh rejected the possibility of working with the Civic Force political movement given its close political and financial ties to the Kremlin, though he noted cooperation with the Just Russia party was possible. He expressed some surprise that Gary Kasparov had accepted an invitation from the Kremlin-linked "Valdai Group" to address a recent gathering of foreign Russian experts in Moscow, though acknowledging it had given him the opportunity to criticize Putin and Medvedev. Kasparov has said unity of democratic opposition forces is essential and should take the form of a coalition, since he doubts the Kremlin will allow the registration of any new party.

#### Building Opposition Support Will Take Time

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¶5. (C) Belykh was critical of the lack of interest on the part of the Russian electorate in digging deeper into the details of the Georgia war, or in supporting or even being open to opposition ideas. Thanks to mass media under Kremlin control and hostage to a "post-imperial" syndrome, citizens remained supportive of the government and generally reticent.

Kosovo recognition was a mistake, but at least it came after two years of international negotiations and almost nine years under UN control. In the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia now had a situation akin to that of Northern Cyprus on its borders, which would also serve as an example to peoples living inside Russia in the North Caucasus that they might achieve their own independence by force.

¶6. (C) Lack of an independent or well-developed judiciary, absence of free elections and free media all contributed to his pessimistic assessment that, in the short term, there was little chance that the democratic oppositions forces, even if they were to unite, would have much chance of breaking United Russia's hold on power. Even if they were to come together, he discounted opposition chances for meaningful representation in national or regional parliaments until ¶2015. He said it was likely he would need to separate his personal integrity from the interests of the party at some point, since he wanted to avoid any Kremlin connections. He closed by noting again that it would be difficult for him to continue to function under the first scenario (SPS as loyal Kremlin opposition) in light of Kremlin steps before the parliamentary elections, including seizing of 20,000 copies of the party newspaper prior to distribution, restricted access to electronic media and other "illegal activities."

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Belykh is clearly uncomfortable with the kinds of compromises that might be required to keep SPS alive. By the end of the year it should be clear whether he has found a way to remain an active leader while the party attempts to build a base and gain political access, or whether other leaders, such as Chubais (who began work September 22 as general director of RosNanoTech, giving him Kremlin-approved access to government "administrative resources" for SPS) will be the new leaders of a different kind of SPS. Ekho Moskvyy Editor Venediktov separately confirmed Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Surkov's continued interest in the idea of a "constructive opposition" anchored by SPS.

BEYRLE